

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 15, 2017

Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program II – Pre-Construction Support

Project No. 00-099-02

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association to conduct pre-construction support activities for the Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program II, Phase 1 project, Tijuana River Estuary, San Diego County.

LOCATION: Tijuana River Estuary, County of San Diego

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association (“the grantee”) for pre-construction support activities for the Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program II/Phase 1 project at the Tijuana River Estuary in San Diego County, subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including budget and schedule; the names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained for project work; and evidence that all funds needed to complete the project have been secured.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.

3. The Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association is a nonprofit organization qualified under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and its purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association (SWIA) for pre-construction support activities for the Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program II - Phase 1 project at the Tijuana River Estuary in San Diego County (TETRP II/Phase I).

When implemented, the TETRP II/Phase 1 will restore approximately 80 acres of tidally influenced wetland and associated habitat as part of the greater TETRP project. Engineering and design of TETRP II Phase 1 is underway and this proposed Conservancy project will provide pre-construction support for the engineering and design project as well as baseline monitoring of the site before implementation. Establishment of baseline conditions will allow SWIA to do effective long-term monitoring of the TETRP II/Phase 1 and contribute those findings to future phases of TETRP II.

This authorization will enable SWIA to establish baseline conditions in the existing marsh and upland transitional habitats within the TETRP II/Phase 1 footprint; conduct biological surveys for marine invertebrates, avian species and small mammals, reptiles and amphibians; develop a cultural resources survey report and for the TETRP II/Phase 1 project site; and finally to provide support for sediment sampling and testing related to the engineering and design for TETRP II/Phase 1. SWIA will provide discrete reports for the pre-construction support and baseline conditions surveys for physical, biological and cultural resources, and the sediment studies will result in support documentation for the engineering and design for TETRP II/Phase 1.

SWIA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 1979 and is dedicated to the acquisition, preservation and restoration of wetlands. Since 1979, SWIA has managed \$30 million of wetlands projects in the Tijuana Estuary. SWIA works in collaborative partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies and is a cooperating association with California State Parks and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Site Description: The proposed project site is located at the south arm of the Tijuana River estuary, within Border Field State Park and the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (TRNERR). The estuary is at the terminus of the 1,750 square mile Tijuana River watershed, which is split by the U.S. – Mexico border, with approximately 75% of the watershed in Mexican territory, and is one of the last relatively intact estuarine ecosystems in southern California. The greater Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program (TETRP) was developed in 1992 and was originally approximately 500 acres in size. TETRP was refined in 2008 under the name TETRP II and reduced to a project area of approximately 250 acres. The approximately 80 acre proposed project area (TETRP Phase II/Phase 1) has been degraded by historic land uses and excess sedimentation but includes remnant intertidal marsh, salt-pannes, mulefat scrub and sinuous slough channels. Several unique habitats exist in the immediate vicinity of the proposed project site, including fresh and saltwater wetlands, dunes, and maritime succulent scrub.

Project History: The TRNERR was established in 1982 in accordance with section 315 of the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972. The Conservancy has played an integral role at the TRNERR since its establishment, including collaborating with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in a 12-year program to assist local partners with the acquisition of 582 acres of private inholdings within the TRNERR.

In 1992, the Conservancy funded the preparation and adoption of a long-range restoration plan for the TRNERR, the TETRP (Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program). Collaboration between the Conservancy, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Pacific Estuarine Research Laboratory and SWIA culminated in the construction of TETRP restoration projects identified in the 1992 plan, the Oneonta Tidal Linkage in 1997 and the Model Marsh in 2000.

Devastating floods in the 1990's resulted in severe sediment impacts to the TETRP site, and the Conservancy's involvement in the estuary broadened to include sediment and pollution management projects in both the U.S. and Mexican portions of the watershed. These impacts contributed to a delay in the further implementation of TETRP. In 2008, the Tijuana Estuary – Friendship Marsh Restoration Feasibility and Design Study refined the project to 250 acres as TETRP II, and recommended in a conceptual, phased restoration project.

SWIA obtained a grant for \$896,000 from the California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) in 2016 to fund the engineering and design phase of the Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program: TETRP II, Phase 1. A science advisory team, affiliated with the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, is participating in the review of TETRP II/Phase 1 that is currently underway. The WCB grant did not include funding for pre-construction monitoring and cultural resources surveys. These surveys and reports are necessary to establish baseline conditions for long term monitoring of the eventual restoration project.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
Project Total	\$300,000

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is the 2013-2014 fiscal year appropriation to the Conservancy from the Habitat Conservation Fund ("HCF") established by the California Wildlife Protection Act of 1990 (Proposition 117), Fish and Game Code §2780 *et seq.* HCF funds may be used for the enhancement of wetlands. (See Fish and Game Code § 2786(d)). For purposes of the HCF, the term "wetlands" includes saltwater marshes. (See Fish and Game Code § 2785(g)). The proposed project will support engineering and design for a future coastal wetland enhancement project. This future project is expected to improve wetland capacity to support nesting of a federally protected species, the light-footed clapper rail, as well as its ability to withstand sea-level rise. Thus, the proposed project is an appropriate use of HCF funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as follows:

Pursuant to §31251, the Conservancy may award grants to local public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources which, because of human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values. Consistent with this section, the proposed authorization provides funds to Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association to support enhancement of coastal resources disturbed by incompatible land uses, such as adjacent inappropriate development that results in impacts to tidal prism in the Tijuana Estuary.

As required by Section 31252, the proposed project is consistent with the General Plans of the City of Imperial Beach and the City of San Diego as described in the Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies below.

Pursuant to §31253, “[t]he Conservancy may provide up to the total of the cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. . . .” Consistent with this section, the proposed contribution, intended for pre-implementation support activities, represents a small component of the future project cost.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support development of a plan for the restoration and enhancement of coastal habitats, including coastal wetlands and intertidal areas.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on October 2, 2014, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section, above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See “Project Financing” section, above.
3. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**
 - a. *Light-footed Clapper Rail Recovery Plan* (United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 1985). The proposed project is consistent with the prime objective of the recovery plan: To increase the light-footed clapper rail breeding population in California by preserving, restoring and/or creating approximately 4,000 ha (10,000 ac) of

- adequately protected and suitably managed wetland habitat. The Tijuana River Estuary marsh is specifically called out for restoration and management, and the proposed project supports planning for restoration in the estuary.
- b. *Coastal Regional Sediment Management Plan for the San Diego Region* (The California Coastal Sediment Management Workgroup, 2009). The TETRP II project is called out as a source of sediment for beach nourishment in the regional sediment management plan. The proposed project supports planning for implementation of TETRP II/Phase 1 which will make sediment available for beach nourishment.
4. **Support of the public:** The proposed project is supported the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California State Parks, the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board/Tijuana River Valley Recovery Team, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.
 5. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zones of the City of Imperial Beach and the City of San Diego.
 6. **Need:** Conservancy funds will provide critical monitoring for the establishment of pre-construction baseline conditions and will support TETRP II/Phase 1.
 7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project is located on State Parks land in the Tijuana River Estuary and is part of the federal Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve. Additionally, the Tijuana River Estuary is a Ramsar Convention-designated “Wetland of International Importance.”
 8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project and TETRP II/Phase 1 will consider multiple sea level rise scenarios and will be designed to make the habitats of the Tijuana River Estuary more adaptable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The proposed project will support a planning project for tidal restoration of the Tijuana River Estuary. TETRP II/Phase 1 will ensure that the Tijuana Estuary can better adapt to potential future sea level rise.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Readiness:** TETRP II/Phase 1 is underway and SWIA is ready to conduct the baseline monitoring and associated tasks of the proposed project.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.
13. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

Consistent with Goal 2 of the Conservation and Open Space Element of the City of Imperial Beach General Plan, the proposed project will provide support to TETRP II/Phase 1 that will

conserve and protect natural resources that are a key foundation of the city by planning for a restoration project in the Tijuana River Estuary.

Consistent with Policy CE-E.7 of the Conservation Element of the City of San Diego General Plan, the proposed project will provide support to a TETRP II/Phase 1 that will manage floodplains to address their multi-purpose use, including natural drainage and habitat preservation, by planning for a restoration project in the Tijuana River Estuary.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project consists of pre-construction support activities and therefore is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306, in that it consists of basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities for possible future actions which have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded, and which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

Upon approval staff will file a Notice of Exemption.